

## Collaboration: The Key to Establishing a Medical Reserve Corps

### Background

Harris County is the third largest county in the nation and largest in the State of Texas with a land area of 1729 square miles and a culturally diversified population of 3,400,578 individuals. The City of Houston is located within Harris County and claims over 2 million in population with over 90 languages spoken. It is the 4<sup>th</sup> most populous city in the country.

Harris County/Houston is one of many regions in the United States that possesses all of the nine assets vulnerable to terrorism: energy (nuclear power, oil/natural gas refineries, pipelines); a major seaport and airport; manufacturers of substances that have a potential for misuse (benzene, butadiene, xylene, ammonia, cyanide); an aerospace complex (NASA); computer manufacturing/software; media; and telecommunications. A tenth asset could be identified in the Texas Medical Center (TMC), the largest medical center in the world, with a local economic impact of \$10 billion. More than 52,000 people work within its facilities, which encompass 21 million square feet. Although these assets contribute to the economic strength of Harris County/Houston, it is clear that they also contribute to the region's increased risk of a terrorist attack.

Harris County provides a rich diversity of health care options. The Texas Medical Center, housed on 675 acres just ten minutes from Downtown Houston, is home to 42 nonprofit and government institutions, including 13 teaching hospitals, two medical schools, four colleges of nursing, a dental college, a college of pharmacy and a college of optometry. Altogether 4.8 million patients visit these institutions each year.<sup>i</sup> In fact, there are more than 85 hospitals in the Harris County/Houston area with more than 19,300 beds, including those in TMC. These facilities employ more than 100,000 health care professionals, almost 7 percent of the Houston-area workforce<sup>ii</sup>. In 1997, the County had 6,024 direct care physicians representing a ratio of 1 per 699 citizens<sup>iii</sup>.

The most pressing issues in Harris County are not the availability of hospital beds and health care providers, but rather the lack of infrastructure to facilitate access to resources that already exist, especially public health and preventative clinical services. This lack of coordinated infrastructure shows up in health care issues related to episodic treatment versus consistent primary care and; as overuse of the emergency rooms for primary care. It shows up as patient non-compliance often because of lack of resources or coordination of care. Without infrastructure and coordination, there is reason to question how the health care delivery system would work in a disaster or emergency.

## **A Defining Year**

2001 was a defining year for Harris County and the entire country. In June, Tropical Storm Allison caused “The Great Flood of 2001” which is now on record as one of the most devastating rain events in the history of the United States. (The President issued a Federal Disaster Declaration on June 9.)

Some of the worst flooding occurred in the Texas Medical Center (TMC); which closed down one of the areas two Level One Trauma Centers. It required the evacuation of hundreds of patients from three of the largest TMC acute care hospitals, with some patients being carried down multiple flights of stairs for transfer to other viable facilities. Some patients were flown to other cities around the state. Emergency rooms closed down or were inaccessible. Hospitals capable of taking new patients turned them away for lack of personnel. Issues of credentialing and hospital policies came into play: volunteers also were turned away because they were not on staff at that particular hospital or part of that particular system.

Allison gave this community a first hand opportunity to practice real disaster skills. The community came together with an outpouring of support and aid. However, it soon became apparent there was a lack of solid coordination between several local entities, including local government, law enforcement, fire and EMS, medical institutions and societies, health and community coalitions, industry, transportation, and volunteer organizations. Preparations for large-scale emergencies and maintenance of medical readiness were inadequate. Private practice physicians and nurses were not engaged efficiently to support first responders, hospital personnel, and to ensure efficient use of every resource available to provide care to critically ill and injured patients. Post Allison assessments suggested that volunteers could have provided staffing to treat more patients and participate in staff rotation to provide relief and decrease fatigue among personnel – some worked 32 hours straight.

Another wake up call occurred on September 11, 2001. While Harris County was still in the midst of post Allison reparations, the terrorist attacks took front row center in the minds, hearts and activities of all Americans. Again, there was a surge of volunteers, donations and offers of help, and again, coordination was sorely lacking.

Post Allison type assessments that had started 3 months earlier in Harris County were now being initiated on a national level. Natural or man-made disasters cause the same local response: people offering to help. A mechanism was needed to manage and focus that energy to maximize productivity when a disaster occurs.

During the 2002 State of the Union Address, President George W. Bush called on each American to make a lifetime commitment to volunteer 4,000 hours serving their communities, the nation and the world. President Bush created the USA Freedom Corps to help Americans answer his call to service and foster a culture of volunteerism, citizenship and responsibility.

Because all disasters are local, coordination of local response becomes the primary focus in volunteer management. The Citizen Corps is the component of the USA Freedom Corps that creates local opportunities for volunteers to help their communities prepare for and respond to emergencies by bringing together local leaders, citizen volunteers and the network of first responder organizations. The Medical Reserve Corps is the component of the Citizens Corps that organizes local health professional volunteers to:

- Assist local, existing community emergency medical response systems
- Maintain disaster readiness through training and classes
- Help the community deal with pressing public health needs and improvements.

### **Putting it All Together**

There have been strong and vital efforts over the last 15 years to improve communication and access to available health care services. The achievements and obstacles experienced by these efforts have created a strong history and foundation in Harris County that led to the development of the Harris County Community Access Collaborative (HCCAC). HCCAC's primary focus is to improve interagency communication and referral infrastructure of the major health care systems and providers in Harris County.

The Collaborative has grown from an initial 6 members in 2000 to its current 125 members and affiliates from health related public, private, faith based, advocacy and other organizations with the mission to facilitate access to adequate health care. As with any successful project, champions came forward to push the process forward and foster enthusiasm and vision. In order to continue to advance the goals of HCCAC and guide/coordinate the activities of the collaborative, Gateway to Care was created as the program arm. Great successes have been celebrated since the collaboration's inception, and visionary goals are still works in progress.

One critical project has been formation of a provider health network for the uninsured population. This project is focused on identifying physicians who are already giving free care to patients and developing a system to coordinate their activities for maximum effect. This network of providers will include all aspects of a persons healthcare needs (diagnostic, treatment and prevention) and tap into the faith and goodwill that is already evident in the current delivery system. Gateway to Care offers management and coordination to facilitate care and is working to replace the haphazard way that charity care is currently being delivered in the private sector.

In Harris County, Judge Robert Eckels has been a champion for HCCAC and Gateway to Care since inception. Recognizing the work done by Gateway to Care and realizing that successes multiply through a working collaborative with a cooperative vision, Judge Eckels became instrumental in creating the Harris County Citizen Corps. He recognized that the Citizen Corps needed to function as a true collaboration

between stakeholders. The vision of working in concert to be prepared as a community was catapulted into reality after 9/11.

As the Citizen Corps evolved, the Medical Reserve Corps started to take shape. Medical resources needed the same coordination in case of a disaster. This became apparent again during the Texas Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)/Terrorism Incident and Smallpox Tabletop Planning Exercises held in May 2002 and December 2002. The single most important finding regarding medical response, was a lack of coordination among local health departments, other appropriate entities, and the medical community in the event of an outbreak or attack.

When grant funding became available to help initiate MRC's throughout the country, Judge Eckels looked to the Hospital District and Gateway to Care to develop a program. Gateway to Care and HCCAC were established and included key stakeholders in the healthcare community. It had a functioning task force already at work to organize the provider health network and the medical community's charity activities. The Collaborative membership voted unanimously to have the MRC managed by Gateway To Care in conjunction with the provider health network task force, if the grant were awarded.

With the support of the Collaborative, a grant application was submitted through Gateway to Care and the Harris County Hospital District as fiscal agent to the Department of Health and Human Services for a Medical Reserve Corps for Harris County, Texas. In addition, HCCAC assured its support through its membership, in recruitment of health care providers, community assessment, and coordination of activities. The members of the Collaborative agreed to have 200 medical personnel from their combined organizations ready to respond and be deployed until the MRC is up and functioning. This was very significant because it offered support from key organizations in disaster management including county and city governments, private organizations, area hospitals and clinics. Gateway to Care and HCCAC were already working for vulnerable populations. In an emergency, the entire population becomes vulnerable. Advancing the MRC goes hand in hand with their mission.

The grant, initiated by Judge Eckels, was awarded to the Harris County Hospital District and Gateway to Care. According to a statement by Judge Eckels,

*"This was a collaborative effort from several agencies. Too many times local agencies compete with each other for grants. We all recognized that we needed to work together to get this award. More importantly, we all recognized, particularly since Tropical Storm Allison, that our emergency response teams need help during a crisis."*

### **Rewards of Collaboration**

The biggest reward from creating the MRC through HCCAC is access to multiple organizations involved with community health and safety.

- The MRC Coordinator is included in meetings at the Hospital District, County and City Health departments as well as Offices of Emergency Management of Harris County and the City of Houston.
- Gateway to Care is an independent non-profit organization with the HCHD as fiscal agent. HCHD pays Gateway to Care's overhead costs for basic operations, so all grant and contribution dollars can focus on program development.
- The MRC Coordinator and the Director of Gateway to Care have positions on the HC Citizen Corps Council. This promotes awareness of the MRC to Fire and Police representatives, yet another layer of emergency responsiveness.
- Foundation and groundwork have been laid to begin implementing a recruitment process to enroll 2000 medical personnel
- Agreement with Texas 211 (free 24/7 information and referral line to community services with information available on hundreds of resources that include food, emergency shelters, disaster relief, etc.) to provide extra staff from Gateway to Care to answer incoming telephone calls during a disaster.

Relationship building at many levels is paramount to the program's success. Relationship building has taken many directions. We are currently working with:

- The County Attorney's office to produce a statement that would inform MRC volunteers about how current laws protect them in the event of an emergency;
- The Harris County Medical Society to keep their members informed of the status of the Reserve Corps through written reports or presentation at meetings
- The President of the Association of Retired Physicians, an organization of over 900 members ~~who~~ already volunteer in clinics around the county, to participate in the many arenas to be offered through the MRC and Provider Health Network.
- Collaborative members to share information.
- County and City Health Department representatives to assess for gaps and how to use the MRC
- Harris County Citizen Corps to enhance web/internet visibility.
- US Department of Health and Human Services, TMC and Harris County Medical Society to determine what is needed for disaster credentialing and how the newest JCAHO standards will impact

In less than a year, benefits from these ongoing collaborations are already showing results. The MRC is included on the County's Citizen Corp website and an application is available to sign up and show an interest in volunteering for the MRC. Through County support, mechanisms are being put in place to

use TranStar to notify MRC volunteers of activation during times of need. The Houston TranStar consortium is a partnership of four government agencies that are responsible for providing Transportation Management and Emergency Management services to the Greater Houston Region. Recognized nationally and internationally, TransStar serves as a model for agencies combining resources across modal and political jurisdictional boundaries in management centers worldwide. Without collaboration, TranStar and the MRC may not have even crossed paths.

### **Take Away the Gold**

The best practice idea to gain from the Harris County Medical Reserve Corps is the importance of collaboration and having visionary leadership. The Harris County MRC started in front of the start line because of the vision of County leadership and the strength and support of existing collaborations. This is the place to start; major stakeholders must come together for the project to have any chance of working. Through collaboration the MRC can be included in planning for all the major stakeholders, allowed to transcend traditional turfdoms, and be a benefit to all. It requires identifying champions and finding the tools to bring forth the vision. There are meaningful models easily available, and with a little tweaking, the model can be suited to any community.

---

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.ci.houston.tx.us/about/houston/health.html>

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>iii</sup> Texas Department of Health Fact Sheet

**Key Words:** Medical Reserve Corps, Citizen Corps, disaster preparedness, emergency management, Gateway to Care

This program would have never been initiated without the hard work and vision of the following individuals:

Judge Robert Eckels - County Judge, Harris County

Ron Cookston, PhD Education - Director, Gateway To Care – Harris County Community Access Collaborative

Mark Sloan – Harris County, County Judge’s Office. Community Service and Special Projects

Jean Dols, PhD – VP of Strategic Planning

King Hillier – Director of Legislative Relations, Harris County